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VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY

Wisdom and Devotion

(JNANA AND BHAKTI)

BY

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

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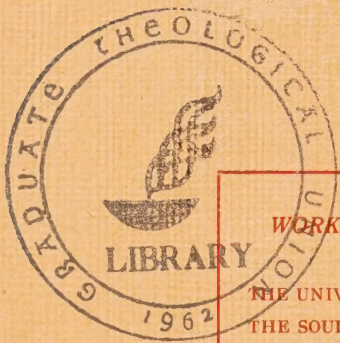

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WISDOM AND DEVOTION

(*Jnana* and *Bhakti*)

By Swami Ramakrishnananda.

Jnana (wisdom) and *Bhakti* (devotion) are inseparably connected. There is a constant hankering in the mind of every man to know. Man's desire for knowledge is almost insatiable; and only when he will be able to say, "I have known all, nothing is left to be known," will his desire for knowledge be satiated. That is to say, nothing short of omniscience will satisfy him. Wisdom means that effulgent condition by which all things are known. Man does not bring this wisdom into existence. It is there all the time. Wisdom lives in the heart of every living being, but we do not perceive it because thick clouds of ignorance obscure it. The five *koshas* or sheaths (body, senses, mind, intellect and the sense of "I") are the five clouds that hide the Truth. Some people claim that these clouds can be dispelled by *Jnana* or wisdom alone, that by sheer denial of the unreal we shall be able to realize the Truth. They hold that by wisdom without *Bhakti*

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or devotion one can know God. Let us see whether it is possible without *Bhakti* for a man to know the self-existent, self-luminous Principle or God, and to be able to identify himself with That.

What is this "I" of which we speak? First we identify ourselves with the body. But the "I" existed before the body. Suppose a man comes to realize this, will he then be able to know God? No. Even if he recognizes that he is separate from the body and goes from one body to another, he must still be a limited being, for only a limited being can go from one place to another. Is it possible for the infinite to move from place to place? No; infinity is everywhere and hence cannot move from one place to another. And true wisdom is infinite. Now this "I" who is Mr. A. today, who was Mr. B. in the past and will be Mr. C. in the future, is it possible for this "I" ever to realize infinite wisdom? No; for as we have said, it goes from one body to another, so it must be finite. But, you may claim, it is constantly increasing, developing, growing in knowledge; therefore it might end by knowing as much as God Himself. This is not possible; for even after many cycles the amount of knowledge it has must be a finite amount; hence compared to infinity it is infinitesimally small and so cannot realize infinite wisdom.

Then how shall we be able to realize it? It is not possible

for this limited "I" to know all; yet there is always the hankering to become omniscient. How shall we satisfy this desire? Evidently this is not the proper method, since it is not possible for the finite mind to know the whole of the universe, because eternally it will remain finite. The sages, however, teach us that the limited, individual ego is not man's true nature. The ambitious soul of man will not be satisfied with a part only. Man will not be at rest until he can say, "Nothing remains to be known. I have known all." Then how can it be attained, this wisdom? The dualists say it cannot be reached. God, the eternal, omniscient One, is eternally there and we are eternally here. The only thing we can do is to make friends with Him. "He is infinitely powerful; I am weak. If I go against His will I shall suffer; so I must be careful not to displease Him. How can I obey Him? He has certain laws given in the Scriptures. If I follow these laws, then gradually love will rise in my heart and I shall glory in obeying the Lord. I shall be glad to do whatever He asks of me. Even if He wishes me to kill my son, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac, I shall gladly give him up to Him, believing that God has only taken His own child."

The man who has reached this state of mind will not find fault with anything that happens in the universe, because all happens by God's will. So, submitting himself constantly to

the Supreme Will, he becomes identified with God, although he keeps himself separate from the Lord as a servant is separate from the master. A servant is in reality only a projection of the master. A man wishes to do more than one body can accomplish, so he buys another body and mind to do his work. They belong to another, but they are really used by him as if they were his own; so master and servant are not really separate. Yet they are also not really one and the same. They are related as a man's hand is to his body. The hand forms a part of the body, serves it and acts only as it wills, but it is still distinct from it. This is known as *Bhakti* or devotion. It is reached by annihilating egoism, by destroying the self-willed nature of man.

Sri Ramakrishna used to illustrate this relation by the story of two fields—one higher than the other. The upper field is filled with water, the lower one is dry. The owner, to water the lower field, makes a channel through which the water may flow. The water flows freely so long as the level of the water in the lower field does not rise as high as that of the upper field. When the level is the same, the flow ceases and they become like one body of water. Then every ripple on the surface of one is communicated to the other. So it is with the true devotee. When he rises to the level of God, the two become one and the same; and the waves of God's thoughts

go through the mind of the devotee. Our Master used to tell another story of three dolls, one of stone, one of cloth, and the third of salt. All three were great friends. One day they wished to take a sea-bath. The first went into the ocean and came back unchanged. The second after going in could hardly drag itself out of the water; and once on land it smelled of the sea, tasted of the sea, and was all full of the salt water. The third never came back. The first is the worldly man; the second is the *Bhakta* or devotee, who is full of Divine love and bliss; and the third is the *Jnani* (the follower of the path of wisdom) who merges his self in the universal Self.

Who is qualified to glorify the Lord? He who regards himself as worthless, as lower than a blade of grass. He who has endurance like a tree, which will even give shade to the man who is cutting it down. And he who thinks he is not worthy of honor, but gives honor to the lowest of creation. A devotee must look upon himself as unworthy, as very lowly. Sitting at home in the midst of his family, a man may think himself a person of importance; but if he goes out and mingles with others who are more important than he, his pride goes down. Still he may feel the importance of the city in which he lives; but when he learns how small Madras is compared to London, how small London is compared to the earth, and that the earth is nothing but a point in the astronomical

heaven, his pride goes down lower and lower, until he realizes that compared to the Lord of the universe he is nothing. Nature abhors a vacuum. As the devotee, therefore, empties himself of himself, he is infilled with God. If he does any work, he feels that it is God who is doing it, not he. If he achieves any success, he believes that it is not his, but God's. "Not I, not I; but Thou, but Thou"—this is his paramount idea; and this is the true type of a *Sannyasin* (one who has dedicated himself wholly to God.)

The *Jnani* (or philosopher) is one who has found out another process. He realizes the hollowness, the nothingness of the world. He no longer identifies himself with the body, but he merges into God and ceases to exist as a separate entity. He attains this by discrimination. In Sanskrit we have the word *Ahamkar,* which means egoism or the sense of "I." To whom does this *aham* or "I" belong? Does it belong to me or to someone else? If I belong to myself, the *Jnani* says, I could command myself. But is it a fact that I direct myself, or am I directed by a power outside myself? If I actually directed myself from my birth, I would direct myself to a palace, to a healthy body; yet I live in a hovel, perhaps, and have a weak body. Who does not want to claim a palace for his home? Who does not want to claim a king for his father? Who does not want the brain of a Newton? Yet all these

things are denied to the man. If he could have chosen, he would have chosen the best of everything. Yet he has a father not to his taste, a wretched house to live in and poor food to eat. Perhaps he may long to study and he has not the money. Everything is against him. Has he then made his own choice? The answer is forced upon him that he has not been able to choose or he would have selected better. He would have chosen those things that would have made him happy.

Thus when we analyze this *aham* or "I-ness," we are forced to admit that nothing belongs to us. I cannot even claim this body as my own. We are here in the hands of an inscrutable Power which regulates all our actions. Hence we must give up all this egoism. Who am I? Is it a fact that I have no power against that Power? What is it that makes me subservient? I am hungry, so I must have to go to His creation for food. I am thirsty, so I must have to go to His creation for water. But, the *Jnani* asks, am I really hungry? Am I really thirsty? In what are hunger and thirst localized? Is it not true that when the body dies and no longer has hunger and thirst, I shall still live? So I am separate from the body. The body and I are distinct entities. The body is merely an instrument in my hands—like a telescope by which I may discover the stars, but which in itself is inert matter. So why should I think that what takes place in the body takes place

in me? Where is all this desire localized? Hunger is in the body; thirst is in the body. To keep the body alive we must sprinkle it with water as we do a plant. If we do not, it will drop down like a dry leaf. But "I" do not drop down.

The story is told that *Maya* (the personified creative force) came one day to a *Jnani* or Sage and said: "Am I not very great? See, I have created so many worlds and moons and stars. I am the ruler of such a vast universe." "You are queen of zero," the Sage replied. Angry at the lack of regard for her greatness, she touched him and he became a camel. He was put in the desert, made to carry heavy burdens over the hot sands and subjected to such cruel treatment that *Maya* herself at last had pity upon him and released him. Then she asked if he would not now fall down and worship her. He only laughed, saying: "I have neither camel's body nor mind. You are not hurting me. You are only slapping your own cheek." *Maya* exclaimed angrily: "You are still incorrigible!" Again she touched him and made him into an ass. As an ass he was beaten, forced to carry ill-smelling burdens and to live a miserable existence. Then once more *Maya* came to him and commanded him to bow down to her. "Why should I? I am not suffering. The ass's body belongs to you, not to me," he replied. At last *Maya,* seeing she could not disturb the serenity of his mind, fell prostrate before him, saying, "It

is you who are the greater."

This is the true attitude of a *Jnani.* For him Self and body are two things, Self and mind are two things; and he understands that the affections of the body or the affections of the mind never touch him. Therefore he fears nothing—not even death. Why should he? Is he not perfect? Is he not infinite? He rather says, "Yes, Lord, all this you have given, now take it away." Thus renunciation becomes his ideal. He knows that he is neither body nor mind, and when he ceases to identify himself with both body and mind, he realizes his infinite nature. Then he knows that he and God are one. Thus by giving up everything he has gained everything. For all belongs to God, and he and God are one.

But he does not get this outside himself, as a man takes money and goes to the bazaar to buy cloth or food. All these things are in him. Before he realized his true nature, he was like a man, who, although rich, yet goes from door to door begging food. His neighbors know that he is rich and look upon him as a hypochondriac or a madman; but even when they tell him that he has money, he still believes himself poor. So this madness is on us. We think that we are the body; that we need food to make us live, we need air to make us live. But when man properly analyzes himself, he finds that he actually wants nothing. He is self-sufficient. What is it

that keeps us from knowing this? It is our egoism that keeps us from knowing what we are. Throw away egoism and we shall know that God and man are one.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that if we thrust a stick in water, the water seems to be divided and we see a right-hand current and a left-hand current. But take the stick out; at once the water becomes one and right-hand and left-hand disappear. So we are one. What makes us believe that we are not? It is the stick of ego thrust into the water of our mind which makes us think there are two currents,—moral and immoral, good and bad, light and darkness, pleasure and pain. Take up the stick. Throw away the "I." If you can do it for one moment, then you will know what you are. This is what is called Realization or the state of super-consciousness. It is attained when the stick has been taken out and the current has become one. This is the goal of *Jnana* or the path of wisdom.

So both in *Jnana* and *Bhakti* a man will have to struggle against the "I." The *Bhakta* or devotee analyzes and finds that the "I" does not belong to him. He plunges it into the infinite "I," so he loses his small egoism. He thinks: "I am smaller than the smallest, I am lower than the lowest. I am nothing." This is the method of the *Bhakta*. The *Jnani* says: "Mind, body, *koshas* (sheaths) do not belong to me. I am

always one and the same. All these waves do not exist in me; they exist in something other than myself,—in matter or *Maya.*" So instead of bringing down this sense of "I," this self-consciousness to the level of the body and mind, he knows that it is self-existent. It is not to be identified with a man's physical nature. He defines the real ego in this way: "It is not a man, not a god, not a householder, not a *Sannyasin,* not rich, not poor; it is nameless and formless." Thus he discriminates about himself and at last finds out that what he was identifying with body was all along spirit.

This can be done in only one way. The limited *aham* or ego which identifies itself with the body and mind is the greatest enemy of man. He must get rid of it. To do this there are two methods. The *Jnani* must select a man who has known his true nature and serve him humbly. Then his egoism will disappear. Sri Ramakrishna had given up all egoism; but still there remained the idea "I am a Brahmin." To destroy this he used to get up early in the morning, take a broom and go and cleanse the house of a Pariah. Through service alone one can get rid of egoism. But when a man wishes to serve without *Bhakti* or devotion, such dry *Jnana* will bring nothing. Egoism can only be got rid of through service with devotion. But so long as anyone is vain and thinks "I am learned, I am great," he cannot serve truly.

Whether we are *Jnanis* or *Bhaktas* we have one common enemy to fight against,—egoism. The *Bhakta* gets rid of it by thinking: "I am nothing, God is all." The *Jnani* gets rid of it by the process of *"Neti, neti,"* "I am not the body, not the mind or the senses." But both must serve. We all serve here in some way, but we are paid for it by the hope of pleasure or gain. Will we serve as willingly for nothing? No. Yet this voluntary service we must have. Only so can we get rid of egoism; and only when egoism is destroyed can we realize God.

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